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ABSTRACT

This paper provides responses to questions which address the effectiveness of California's instructional program and possible strategies for its improvement. The text mentions several topics including "excellence for all"; the needs of a "demographically changing student population"; James Coleman's notion that public schools meet the "social capital" needs of children; and "structural, organizational, and environmental changes at the school site level." Undergirding the responses are the assumptions that the questions interrelate, and that Coleman's "social capital" idea links to instructional program effectiveness and improvement issues. In refuting Coleman's notions, public school organizational and instructional reforms are proposed. (JAM)

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"Social Capital" and The Improvement of Instruction

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Paper Prepared for the Commission on Public School Administration and Leadership

February 1988

The author would like to acknowledge the collegial assistance of Mr. David Moody, UCLA doctoral student in Administration and Curriculum Studies. Parts of his review of the Coleman book are excerpted in the manuscript. The opinions and conclusions stated in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of ACSA, the Commission on Public School Administration and Leadership, or individual members of these organizations.

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"Social Capital" and The Improvement of Instruction

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This paper provides responses to questions posed to the author by the Commission on Public School Administration and Leadership, a panel convened by the Association of California School Administrators. The questions address the effectiveness of California's instructional program and possible strategies for its improvement. The charge to the author also calls for the consideration of several specific topics, including: "excellence for all," the needs of a "demographically changing student population," sociologist James Coleman's notion that a new public institution is required to address the "social capital" needs of children, and "structural, organizational, and environmental changes at the school site level" that would improve the instructional program.

Because the questions are broad, I have chosen to narrow the task in this paper by making a few assumptions about the interests of the Commission. I first assume that the questions are interrelated in the initial thinking of Commission members, and that identifying their connecting strands is an important part of the assignment. I also presume the Commission harbors a keen interest in organizational improvement strategies of the sort that school administrators and leaders may be best positioned to bring about. Finally, I infer that amidst the broad spectrum of novel organizational possibilities for the schools, there is a pressing interest in Coleman's "social capital" idea and its relevance to organization-focused instructional improvement.

I turn now to the questions and my responses.

Question 1: How effective is the present instructional program?

On Its General Effectiveness

A simple but important answer to this question is that the contemporary instructional program writ large is not effective enough. Visible outcomes of schooling have failed to satisfy many members of indispensible constituencies of the public schools and are likely to continue to fall short. These constituencies include parents, business leaders, higher education leaders, and legislators, along with the children themselves.

Corroborating signals are legion and include a diversity of comparisons and voices. Among them are embarassing juxtapositions of our top students with those of other nations in tests of mathematics and science, the bleak testimony of private sector personnel officers and college admissions directors, humanist exposes of gaps in cultural knowledge among adolescents, fallen SAT scores -- a long and familiar listing. Taken together, these signals imply that attention to instructional improvement is nothing short of mandatory. The question seems to be how and in what directions, not whether.

I will not attempt to recount or assess the full litany of criticisms in this short analysis. But I would like to examine one example of current criticism and the ambiguities it engenders in this environment. Finn and Ravitch in their book, What Do Our 17-Year-Olds Know?, popularized jibes of the following sort: A recent National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) test revealed that nearly 60 percent of American 11th graders could not identify the half-century in which our Civil War took place. In response to this and like findings, the public has cried out in horror, Fortune Magazine incorporated the statistic in an article panning the schools, and the profession is hauled to the woodshed once again for its lax standards.

Upon closer examination, this example points sharply to what we do not know about our schools. First, we have no idea how 11th graders in past years would have performed on the Civil War question. In the absence of baseline data, it is easy for highly

educated academics, politicians, and journalists to react with dismay. They share a conviction that this should be common knowledge across our youth (after all, they themselves know the answer and might even judge it important). They also assume that in some golden age past it actually was commonly learned.

Second, when high schoolers do not know such a fact, just which or what combinations of the following may be at fault? Is it because we do not know how to teach it? -- Yes, concludes selected research. Or because we forgot to require sufficient history classes? -- Certainly, say the sponsors of popular reforms. Or is it because this fact is not valued, and therefore rejected, by students who are exposed to it? Yes to this, say others. And in a fundamental way, James Coleman says yes to this last observation in his recent discussion of "social capital." We return to this point below.

A further discussion of the merits of specific challenges to our schools could prove interesting and would surely reveal the speciousness of some popular perceptions. But my assessment is that the socially constructed and socially validated critique of the schools will not be dispelled by defensiveness on the part of educators. Arguments that current assessments are wrong (some surely are), and claims that schools actually work well when their true contributions are sifted from the data, will fall on deaf ears everywhere, from Washington to Sacramento to the local community.

Finally, while public attention to the preparedness of youth

for adulthood may proceed in multiple arenas and through different agencies, the schools remain unshakably at the center of this agenda. And early returns do not suggest that the "excellence" reforms legislated here and across the 50 states are about to satisfy critics that enough has been done.

On Selective Effectiveness

A second summary answer to the question of effectiveness is found not in the general critique outlined above but in observations that existing instructional programs are only selectively effective. Some youngsters do well in school and others do not, a natural expectation. But assignments to the achievement spectrum are far from random, and to many this constitutes a major social problem.

Some children display educational disadvantages that appear to be grounded in family education levels and American social structure. The children of poorly educated parents, including disproportionate shares of certain minority and immigrant groups, often enter primary schools with learning deficits. These deficits tend to be magnified and not reduced over the school years. Our long history with corrective policies such as compensatory education shows little systematic change in this basic pattern. And recent research has shown that traditional learning differences between children from the dominant white culture on the one hand, and Blacks and Hispanics on the other hand, have proved rather intransigent (Bock & Moore, 1986).

Perhaps nowhere is selective effectiveness seen so clearly than in the dimensions of the school dropout phenomenon. Despite controversies surrounding the sufficiency and reliability of dropout data, we know enough to bring important perspectives to this discussion: that about a fourth of our 9th graders do not graduate with their high school classes; that this statistic is nearly doubled in many of the nation's urban centers; that California dropout rates are thought to exceed these national averages; and that we have seen no positive systematic movement of dropout statistics anywhere in the United States in recent years.

Our dropout propensity raises important issues concerning the effectiveness of the instructional program, or at least the effectiveness of the school as a meaningful institution in the lives of all adolescents. As I have stated, about a fourth abandon the diploma as a goal and leave school. Another substantial but unknown fraction persist in school while largely turned-off to the experience. This suggests that perhaps one third and probably more of our youth are basically not served in schools by the time they reach the age of 16. This suggests to me an "institutional pathology." If in fact the schools are designed and publicly supported to bring sustained services to all children over a full 13 years, they have simply failed to reach this goal by a wide margin.

Ted Sizer in his 1984 work, Horace's Compromise, cites an example that underscores what I mean by schools's selective

effectiveness. It goes roughly like this. The high school English teacher has 150 pupils in 5 classes. About 30 are keenly interested in the ideas behind the readings and the class discussions. Another 90 are passive and unenthused -- it is difficult to get them to offer a comment or reaction, or to complete readings. The remaining 30 are openly hostile to the class and the school. The teacher consequently strikes bargains with the pupils. If the alienated 30 will agree not to disrupt the class, they will pass, even if they do not show up. If the passive, uninterested remain quietly so, he can proceed to work with the remaining 30 who are really engaged. The result?-- an 11th grade English experience that is only "selectively" effective. We see a teacher who works intensively with 30, a richness borne on the silent neglect of the uninterested majority.

In summary, on the question of how effective is the instructional program, I have stressed two observations. First, there are wide ranging critiques of the effectiveness of the schools that simply cannot be ignored by the profession; I presume the creation of the Commission is testimony to this view. Second, I have raised the question of selective effectiveness which presents well recognized and unsolved problems. I will now turn to Coleman's "social capital" discussion and its relevance to these two conceptions of effectiveness.

Question 2: What needs to be done to improve the effectiveness of the instructional program (focusing on Coleman's social capital ideas)?

AND

Question 3: What structural, organizational, and environmental changes at the school site should be considered in an improvement strategy?

I will address these two questions with one discussion because they overlap and seem to call for an integrated response. Both questions concern what might be done to improve the instructional program. I enlist Coleman's social capital idea as a unifying thread.

The Child's Social Capital

> Coleman writes, "What I mean by social capital in the raising of children is the norms, the social networks, and the relationships between adults and children that are of value for a child's growing up."

In the context of childrearing, social capital is the availability to the child of knowledge and guidance from whatever network of adult relationships the child has access to. This of course means primarily the family and the school, but includes other social institutions such as the church and other out-of-school associations.

In Coleman's logic, this concept of social capital descends from the widely known economic idea of human capital. Human capital is the fund of productive but non-material assets invested in any individual, namely knowledge, skills, attitudes, and motivations. Social capital, so his argument goes, facilitates the transfer of human capital, or more simply its acquisition by youth.

What Coleman is saying is that the network of relationships with adults in a child's life has a great deal to do with what the child learns, the skills he or she develops, the child's attitudes toward social conventions including work, family, and civic responsibility, and his or her basic life motivations. It would be hard to describe more succinctly the commonly held targets of our schools. Since Coleman is presenting an analysis that appears fundamentally germane to the attainment of these things by our youth, it is worth further investigation.

It might be useful to point out here that the educational critiques described in the response to the first question hardly grasp the full spectrum of what Coleman is talking about. Scores and item responses on large-scale standardized tests, coins of the realm in the educational assessment trade, have grown little beyond an approximation of basic skill levels over the last century. Coleman can only assume, but probably rightly, that the richer set of outcomes he describes has suffered erosion in recent years.

We should also recognize that the Commission's emphasis on the "instructional program" may seem narrower than the thrust offered by Coleman. But Coleman asserts, again probably correctly, that children with access to social capital are better equipped to benefit from the school's academic training.

Have the Conditions of Social Capital Changed?

Coleman brings some convincing evidence to bear on the changed circumstances of childrearing in the United States and he translates this characterization to the likely consequences for the acquisition of social capital. He cites the increased concentration of adult attention (by both fathers and mothers) on careers and income, thereby leaving to the schools and others the tasks of socialization. To this trend we naturally add the increasing share of children raised in one parent households, now perhaps 25 percent in California and more in many schools. One result of the economic focusing of parental activity may be increased economic rewards, opportunities, and demands that could assist children. But the same behavior also undercuts children's access to adult nurturing of attitudes, motivations, and self-conceptions. And the influence is felt not only in intra-family allocations of time: narcissistic and career-bent parents, according to Coleman, tend not to support community organizations, such as the PTA and scouting -- other sources of adult-child interactions.

Coleman further argues that the provision of social capital to children is a direct function of family economic status. Families short on human capital (poorly educated, low wage earners) are in disadvantaged positions to create social capital for their children. We presume critical linkages in this argument to include reduced press for education, more single parent homes, and more adult time devoted to economic struggles.

We should add to this view however, that the analysis allows social capital deprivation at all class strata. The too-busy affluent parents who "buy off" their children with cars, stereos, holidays, even drugs can leave them in a social capital vacuum.

Does Social Capital Matter?

I will not further expound the changes Coleman describes and to which most would grant much agreement. I will rather proceed to some of his analyses and the implications he draws.

A cursory assessment of whether social capital matters cuts in contradictory directions: Coleman generates exceedingly inadequate corroboration, but his arguments for the importance of social capital in the life of the child would find widespread academic, professional, and parental agreement.

For evidence that social capital actually does make a difference, Coleman turns to his well-worn and still controversial Catholic school performance advantages -- test scores and dropout rates. Coleman ascribes better test scores and particularly lower dropout rates in the Catholic schools to the provision of social capital through their communities.

To shorten a long story for this paper, many readers of both his article and the complete book on which it is based, (Coleman and Hoffer, Public and Private High Schools, 1987) judge that there is little concrete data pointing to Coleman's conclusions regarding social capital advantages in the Catholic schools. It seems rather an insightful and intuitive explanation for what he

sees, dressed-up in a little data to provide respectability. Unfortunately, rather than providing respectability, his data analyses lend a carnival sideshow atmosphere to the work. While it may be an aside to the Commission's interests, a brief course through Coleman's analysis may be worthwhile.

For evidence of the Catholic school social capital advantage, Coleman relies mainly on an analysis of comparative dropout rates. He cites the steady one-fourth dropout rate discussed above, and notes the findings of the recent High School and Beyond Survey: that the national public school dropout rate for two years (1980-82) was 14.1 percent, the Catholic school dropout rate was 3.9 percent, and the dropout rate from non-Catholic private schools was 11.9 percent. These numbers are certainly impressive evidence of something: the question is, evidence of what? Coleman declares there are three possibilities:

(1) Private school administrators have greater lattitude than do public school leaders in dismissing problem students before these students show up in dropout statistics.

(2) The "functional community" of some schools constitutes a support system (social capital-conferring) that enables problem students to stay in school.

(3) The "value community" surrounding some schools constitutes another kind of support system for problem students.

In considering only these three hypotheses, it is quickly clear how Coleman reaches his conclusions in favor of hypothesis

two, the social capital argument. All private schools are assumed to have a "value community." Yet the non-Catholic private schools have much higher dropout rates; so hypothesis three is rejected. The same problem trips up hypothesis one, since non-Catholic private school administrators can dismiss children as freely as their Catholic counterparts.

Additional objections to the analysis can be raised. One, there were fewer than 30 "other" private schools in the national HS&B sample and no one has suggested that this number can approximate the diversity of non-Catholic private schools. So the data for this "sector" do not represent any known entity. Two, a long-standing question of private school selection-bias has never been adequately addressed by Coleman in his work on public/private school comparisons. Could it be that children entering Catholic schools would be less disposed to dropping out wherever they might be schooled? Is this perhaps evidenced in their parents' active choice of a private school?

Even more telling is the limited explicit evidence of social capital access provided by Coleman, not in the article which produced none, but in the book which should have produced more. Chapter Two offers data that actually demonstrate the existence of more social capital in the lives of Catholic students. But the slim offering consists of three tables showing only these comparisons:

(1) Parental involvement as perceived by students.

(2) Parental involvement as perceived by administrators.

(3) Parental involvement as revealed by, for example, attending PTA meetings or parent teacher conferences, or visiting classes in session.

Even if we accept the self-reports in these tables at face value, as showing greater parental participation in Catholic schools, we must respond with another question: Is parental involvement the sole indicator of social capital? From Coleman's description of the term, one expects to encounter whole networks of relationships, involving perhaps aunts, uncles, grandparents, church officials, peers' parents, neighbors, coaches, video-store clerks, and so on. Such a network may in fact exist, and it may in fact account for Catholic schools' retentive powers. But if so, the data that would support this view are not presented in the published record.

Where does this discussion of social capital leave us? Coleman's analyses of the circumstances of growing up have always impressed his readers as rich and on-target. Perhaps most compelling in this regard were his early Adolescent Society and his recent review Becoming Adult in a Changing Society. The discussion in Education Researcher reads the same way. One cannot help believing that the access of youth to adults of the sorts discussed by Coleman are both critically important and sorely suffering in modern day America. If one could structure an appropriate data collection enterprise, the basic contentions of Coleman would probably stand up. I do not mean to say that

Catholic schools would necessarily prove to be luminary, but rather that a youngster's access to social capital as defined by Coleman would have robust and positive effects on his education and development.

Organizational Directions for Schools?

Judging from this analysis, any changes in the schools or other social institutions stemming from the social capital idea would have both prospects and limitations to go on at the present time. First, we can identify a convincing set of arguments that the ingredients of social capital for children described by Coleman are in short and dwindling supply. This suggests a strong current need, and a concern more likely to find expression in school policies than anywhere else in the short run. Second, for the time being, any such policies cannot responsibly lean on data showing that changes in social capital produce their assumed differences. Such an assessment awaits another study of considerable scale, given the depth and breadth of the topic.

I am struck with several aspects of the social capital idea that interact with the assessments of instructional effectiveness presented above and also with current and prospective instructional reform policies. First, the Coleman assessment of eroding social capital conditions for children as a general proposition establishes a working hypothesis helping to explain various negative assessments of the general effectiveness of our schools. Perhaps left by his parents to his own devices and to 6 hours of

television daily, the 17 year old spurns any association with the Civil War. But without data to assist in the assessment of competing hypotheses, we cannot push this argument to preeminence. Nonetheless, this general explanation has great appeal.

Second, selective effectiveness of the instructional program also finds credible explanations in the Coleman analysis. After all, the educationally disadvantaged youngsters referenced in the first section of the paper are the very same ones likely to suffer the greatest shortages and erosion of social capital. Perhaps answers to reducing selective disadvantages lie in providing reciprocal and selective social capital infusions.

Third, there are strong currents in the Coleman analysis that run against the flow of academic "excellence" reforms of recent years. A summary view of these reforms is that they require more in terms of time and content, but do little to augment conditions for success, particularly among low achievers and some minority children such as limited English speakers. Coleman directly attacks these reforms when he states that children do not need more doses of academics as a fix for instructional malaise, but rather doses of social capital.

And fourth, there are strong similarities between Coleman's prescriptions and what we hear from researchers about the qualities of successful programs for potential school dropouts. Wehlage (1986) and others have argued that institutional responsiveness is essential to reach struggling students. This

responsiveness takes shape as close adult-student contact, small programs, attention to the full spectrum of problems faced by students (such as family problems, drug and alcolhol use), coaching-like behaviors, and personal mentorship. Point by point, these elements seem to describe the provision of social capital.

A Proposal

We cannot justify the provision of social capital at substantial public expense in the absence of evidence that social benefits would follow. The following remarks assume that such evidence has been produced, or that decisionmakers are otherwise convinced that enhancing social capital is a priority for youth policy.

The principal tenet of social capital is close adult-child contact with these qualities: "attention, personal interest and intensity of involvement, some persistence and continuity over time, and a certain degree of intimacy." (ER, p. 38) Coleman asserts that a new social institution may be needed to provide this during such times as the pre-school years, after school, and all day during the summers. I would like to suggest a model of school organization that incorporates the social capital idea within the more traditional time domain of schools, and leave the creation of more radical social institutions to others for the present time.

The most obvious implication of Coleman's analysis for schools is the need for smallness -- small organizational size

and small classes. Sizer's description of the English teacher outlines a circumstance where productivity would be likely to soar if he were assigned 60 and not 150 students. (It might be appropriate to remind readers that the generally flat research findings on class size effects were based on comparisions typically generated in classes ranging from 26 to 35 students, hardly a test of this idea.) It is likely that teachers under such an arrangement would become much more interested in and involved with individual students -- more aware of their pursuits in and out of school, their problems, and so on.

I am also attracted to a larger structural suggestion that grows out of contemporary school reform proposals here in California and in the state of Minnesota.(1) Social capital serves as an added twist and rationale. This idea can be described as follows. A common core academic program, characterized by the rich teacher resources idealized for Sizer's English teacher above (and reflecting the "excellence" directions of current reform efforts), would be located in grades one through ten. The social capital enhancing arrangements might produce more progress, by more students, than we currently detect. The new structure would call on each teacher to be a mentor, counselor, and coach, with few enough charges to facilitate high personal awareness of a full spectrum of activities and issues in the lives of children. The curriculum might call for more continuity of teachers with children from year to year to enhance such relationships.

This academic core could also incorporate the "accellerated schools for the disadvantaged" idea under experimentation and study by Prof. Henry M. Levin at Stanford. Since the Commission has requesed a paper from Levin, its members may have received information about this. If they have not, they would probably be interested to see Levin's plan and its rationale.

The last two years of high school under this proposed structure would represent a sharp departure from the common core of the first ten years. Here a wide range of education and training options would be available at public expense. Some of these, like enriched college preparatory classes, would be available at the schools. Vocational training may be provided within schools or at public regional occupational centers, but private industry options would also also be encouraged. Higher education institutions might become providers of desired training for 17 and 18 year olds.

Several points support such an expanded set of arrangements for the last two years of high school. First, many students now have dropped out by the time they reach these years and thus (usually) benefit from no additional training. Second, the implicit provision of choices, perhaps through entitlements, might create more circumstances where 17 and 18 year olds are actively interested in their educations, not just passive acceptors of something they do not value. Third, a richer set of possibilities accompanied by choice would enhance the likelilhood that these youngsters would spend these years under the tutelage

of adults who care about their development. At least if this quality was demanded by students, they could attempt to seek it out in their training situations.

This suggested model is of course only a very thin sketch, and its features could be pulled and tugged as various visions are accommodated. And nothing, except perhaps its general scale, is wholly grounded on social capital arguments. It does represent to me an interesting way of incoporating a strong common focus on academics, but over an appropriately limited number of years instead of the entire twelve. This early core period could be enriched by educator-adult relationships smacking of social capital creation. The model also builds in educational choice at the back end. Choice, through such mechanisms as the education voucher, is a way of pursuing many things in the words of its advocates. Choice also appears to offer prospects for enhancing social capital in the terms of this discussion.

To achieve the points of social capital leverage it incorporates, this model would be very expensive. Any social-capital-intensive public institution could only be assumed to involve substantial costs, particularly when we recall Coleman's admonishments of the general absence of adult-power for voluntary contributions toward this end. The roughed-in prototype requires a doubling of teaching resources or more. A decision to move in this direction would require a commitment by society that it is serious about changing the circumstances under which children are growing up -- a commitment to transfer some of the resources

generated by parental economic preoccupations to the vacuum left behind for their children -- and a commitment that the nation is indeed <u>at risk</u> because of the way we guide our young into the adult world. Resource allocations to today's youth do not suggest that we take this risk very seriously.

Note

(1) A recent school reform proposal of Governor Rudy Perpich in Minnesota incorporated a similar scheme. The California Business Roundtable recently entertained a similar proposal designed by Berman-Weiler Associates in Berkeley. Social capital arguments were not explicitly entertained in any related deliberations, to the author's knowledge.

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